

October 15, 1994 (Vol. 10, no. 4)

Dear Colleague:

National Public Radio recently presented a three-part program on capital punishment. Grisly stuff for breakfast listening, yet I couldn't switch it off. There was a detailed account of a Texas prisoner's last day in prison, which included a session with his attorney, a final appeal to the governor, visits by friends and relatives, the traditional last meal, which, on request, consisted of fried shrimps with a side dish of coleslaw, visit with the chaplain, and, lastly, the trip to the execution chamber where he died of lethal injection, while prison officials, chaplain, and physician looked on. As I listened, one weird emotion welled up in me which I never anticipated. It was--ENVY! (Len, is this response explained in your book?) How will I die? In a car or airplane accident? By gunshot at a service station? Cancer? AIDS? However my life ends, it will be without the support of society: no ceremonial visit by the chaplain, no last meal of my choice, no official on hand to make sure that I depart as painlessly as possible. For these privileges, I must first kill someone!

Many years ago, when I was still in my mid-forties, I had a horrible dream. I dreamed that I had died in bed one summer. It occurred to me that my death would not be discovered for weeks. No one at the office expected me to turn up during the long vacation. So, as my dead body started to rot, I grew more and more anxious until I remembered that my cleaning woman would come to do my apartment in a few days. She had the key. I heard the sound of the key turning in the door. I jumped out of bed to warn her of the horrible sight she was about to confront, only to realize that, if anything was more horrible than a decaying corpse, it was such a corpse tottering toward her on foot! At that moment I woke up.

This scenario out of a nightmare, strange to say, is among the best that I can hope for. It is at least painless. But where is the ceremony? Where is the chaplain? Who will wake the governor?

Best wishes,

*Y. Fu*